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SUBJECT: SUSPICIONS REMAIN HIGH AS CONFLICT, ABUSES
CONTINUE IN SOMALI REGION

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 1797
[1](#)B. ADDIS ABABA 2941

Classified By: CDA Tulinabo Mushingi for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Contacts in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State report that although humanitarian access has improved, the humanitarian situation has declined since 2007, as a result of continued conflict, restricted humanitarian access, trade blockage, and repeated seasons of poor rain. Government of Ethiopia (GoE) police and militia are reportedly conscripted, include children as young as 14, and receive inadequate training. GoE human rights abuses including arbitrary detention, rape, and killing reportedly continue at 2007 levels. The UN's Somali Regional office believes Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) attacks in November represent increased capability, strength, and membership of the ONLF, despite heavy ONLF losses. While the regional government reports it is prepared to hold free and fair elections in May 2010, there is little interest in the elections amongst a cynical population. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) During a November 23-25 visit to Jijija, capital of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, PolOff discussed humanitarian access, ongoing conflict, and political dynamics with regional government representatives, political party leaders, NGO workers, local elders, and international organization (IO) officials.

Humanitarian Situation Deteriorating, Access Still Restricted

[1](#)3. (SBU) Humanitarian workers from every NGO and international organization with which PolOff spoke reported that the humanitarian situation in Somali Regional State has worsened over the past two years, despite improved access and coordination. While contacts offered slightly varying reports based on the zones in which their organizations operate and services they provide, the clear message was that the combination of continued conflict between government forces and insurgent groups, restricted access for humanitarian workers, blockage of established trade routes, and several seasons of poor rains has resulted in a deteriorating health and food security environment and drained the ability of the local population to absorb these shocks.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Somali Regional State Humanitarian Coordinator Abdi Fattah told PolOff that coordination between the regional

government and humanitarian actors has improved, and the adoption of the "hubs and spokes" delivery mechanism has enabled faster delivery and better monitoring of food aid. However, insecurity in the region still constitutes a serious challenge to providing needed services, and he admitted there were significant limits on the ability of humanitarian agencies to work in the region. According to Abdi, while many agencies currently operate without difficulty in areas where the ONLF is present, the GoE believes they may be targeted. He noted that agencies transporting relief food and other valuable supplies must be escorted because the ONLF seizes relief food to feed its fighters, as well as to sell or distribute to supportive local people. Abdi assessed that cooperation between the regional government and the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) was good at the higher levels, but poor at the lower levels, resulting in complications for NGOs seeking ENDF clearance to enter certain areas.

15. (C) Abraham Leno, Director of Mercy Corps' Somali Region office, told PolOff access for humanitarian actors had improved over the past six months, but unexpected and unexplained restrictions continued. Government restrictions on transport and trade (aimed largely at preventing insurgents from crossing into neighboring Somalia) prohibit local people from buying food from accessible markets and drive up food prices. Abraham added that in areas branded as "anti-peace" (i.e., where the populous supports the ONLF), the situation has greatly worsened. In such areas, the delivery of all social services, including emergency food and water, has been completely blocked. International Rescue Committee Field Coordinator Mohammed Ismal told PolOff that

ADDIS ABAB 00002977 002 OF 004

the GoE continues to limit humanitarian access to "anti-peace" communities as part of its counter-insurgency strategy, with the express purpose of weakening communities that support the ONLF. Humanitarian actors who try to enter these areas are intensely questioned by military personnel, and are generally turned away even if they have obtained the required GoE clearances.

GoE Highly Suspicious of Humanitarian Actors' Motives

16. (C) Relief workers reported that the GoE is highly suspicious of all non-government actors, resulting in a tense environment and unnecessary access barriers. Mercy Corps Program Coordinator Abdi Aden told PolOff the perception of regional and military officials is that all NGO workers are reporting on human rights, security, and political conditions to their headquarters. Farah Omer Beto, Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Somali region, noted that the GoE fears NGO workers will personally witness the strength of the ONLF, as well as the government's human rights abuses. Mercy Corps' Leno explained that his staff must appear completely ignorant of political or security matters to avoid arousing suspicion. Save the Children (UK) Regional Manager Mohamed Mohamed noted that both sides (government and insurgent) suspect humanitarian actors of supporting the other side, leaving local communities unsure if they can trust aid workers and participate in relief programs without provoking the ire of one or both sides.

17. (C) Such suspicions have resulted in direct action against humanitarian workers. IRC's Mohammed reported that two IRC water engineers had been arrested on suspicion of being journalists. (Note: There is no official prohibition against journalists' travel in the region. End note.) Mercy Corps reported that NGO personnel have been compelled by ENDF and police personnel to report ONLF activity, and have faced beatings and death threats from these entities if they do not comply (Ref A). In another incident, militia members demanded that a Medecins Sans Frontieres driver provide them with transport, in violation of MSF's policy and thereby jeopardizing the driver's job.

Human Rights Abuses Reportedly Continue at 2007 Levels

¶18. (C) Many contacts in the Somali region were unwilling to discuss human rights abuses, with UN Security Chief Joseph Macapili noting that UN personnel are not permitted to discuss human rights issues because of the risk of expulsion from the region. All sources who discussed human rights told PolOff the ENDF, police, and militias continue to commit human rights abuses at the levels similar to 2007. (Note: Reports of human rights abuses in the region peaked at this time, after ONLF attacks on a Chinese oil facility prompted an increase in GoE counter-insurgency measures. End note.)

¶19. (C) Sultan Abdulhadiir, an Ogadeni clan elder from Waradheer zone, told PolOff that government forces continue to withhold food and block legitimate trade from "anti-peace" communities, and continue to engage in mass arrests, rapes, and killings of ONLF supporters. He reported that the only tactic government forces have ceased to utilize is the burning of villages. (Comment: In 2008, Human Rights Watch published satellite photos of villages prior to and after such burnings, publicizing the international community's ability to monitor this particular tactic. End comment.) He added that the Jijiga prison, nicknamed "Ogaden Prison" for the volume of Ogadeni clansmen detained there, holds some 3,000 suspected ONLF supporters. The prison was designed to hold 600 prisoners. Ahmed Maah, a UNICEF Child Protection Specialist who had personally visited the prison, said the prison currently holds over 200 children between ages 12 and ¶18. Of these, 100 are children who are accused only being associated with the ONLF.

¶10. (C) UNICEF's Ahmed stated that both government forces (notably local militias) and the ONLF recruit child soldiers. He stated that in Fik zone, he had routinely witnessed children as young as 14 carrying guns and serving in local militias. The Special Police appear to be more sensitive to the issue, but Ahmed stated there are likely children aged

ADDIS ABAB 00002977 003 OF 004

16-17 serving in the Special Police. Ahmed explained that children as young as 14 are recruited into the local militias because of the quotas the GoE enforces. Their families are threatened by recruiters who allege they have sons in the ONLF, and must therefore contribute a son to the militia. If the only son remaining at home is a child, the family has no choice but to send him to join the militia. Sultan Abdulhadiir also stated that both special police and militia members were forcibly recruited, and that Somali Regional State Security Chief Abdi Mohamed Umar (a.k.a. Abdi Illi) was personally leading recruitment efforts.

¶11. (C) Ahmed also reported significant problems with the special police, describing arbitrary detention and rough handling of suspected ONLF supporters or criminals. It was unclear to him whether this lack of professionalism was a result of poor training, or whether the Special Police had been ordered to engage in such tactics to coerce the local population. Mercy Corps' Abdi said both the Special Police (who are paid and receive some training) and the militia (who are unpaid and receive no training) are abusive to the local population.

ONLF Initiates Coordinated Attacks, Suffers Heavy Losses

¶12. (C) UN Security Chief Macapili told PolOff the coordinated ONLF attacks on GoE and military installations across the Somali region on November 11 were a strategic victory, despite heavy ONLF losses. The level of coordination and large number of insurgents involved surprised many in the region, and the UN Department of Safety and Security believed the attacks represented increased

capability, strength, and membership of the ONLF. Macapili added that the attacks, launched three days after the GoE released a statement that the ONLF presented no threat to government interests in the Somali region, was likely designed to demonstrate the ONLF's relevance and tactical abilities. Attacks were carried out in 21 locations across five zones, but Macapili described four of these attacks as "very well planned" and the remaining 17 as "hit and run" attacks that may have been included on late notice. Macapili reported approximately 200 ONLF and 50-100 government forces were killed in the attacks. (Comment: UNDSS's figures on attack locations and casualties match estimates received by other Mission sources. As is common, the GoE and ONLF respectively released figures demonstrating few losses on their own side, and greater losses on the opposite side. End comment.)

¶13. (C) In response to these attacks, Macapili stated the ENDF has relocated 49 military trucks to Fik zone, 75 trucks to Degehabur zone, and 55 trucks to the remaining three conflict zones. Additional personnel and munitions have been moved into Jijiga as well. Speaking of the insurgency more broadly, UNDSS does not consider the ONLF a great threat to humanitarian operations, as ONLF insurgents generally only stop and question humanitarian convoys, and the ONLF is not linked to radical Islamic rebels elsewhere in Somali region or Somalia. The United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF) presents a greater threat to humanitarian actors, and has in the past stolen vehicles and valuable supplies from UN and NGO workers. UNDSS believes the UWSLF may be linked to al-Shabaab. Macapili said UNDSS has solid evidence that al-Shabaab is operating near Dolo Odo in the Somalia-Kenya-Ethiopia tri-border region, and may be present inside Ethiopia. Ethiopian insurgents based along the Ethiopia-Somalia border between Dolo Odo and FeerFeer may be cooperating with al-Shabaab.

Low Expectations for 2010 Elections

¶14. (C) Campaigning for the 2010 parliamentary elections began in earnest in late November, with the ruling Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP, which caucuses with the EPRDF) holding rallies in nine major towns, each drawing approximately 500 attendees. No opposition party events had been held at the time of PolOff's visit. Somali opposition party officials reported that their members have been harassed by SPDP officials and party cadres in Jijiga (Ref B), and Jijiga contacts expressed that opposition parties

ADDIS ABAB 00002977 004 OF 004

were not able to engage in significant campaign activities in the region. All non-government contacts with whom PolOff spoke reported that people in the Somali region have little interest in the upcoming election, and those in rural areas are not even aware of election plans. Elder Sultan Abdulhadiir explained that years of GoE and ENDF manipulation of voting in the region have turned voters off to the process. In past elections, there have never been outside observers in Sultan's Waradheer zone, and he reported a stronger presence of ENDF forces around polling places than in other parts of the country.

¶15. (C) In contrast, Ahmed Cali Geedi, SPDP Director of Public Relations, told PolOff that the Somali Regional State is fully prepared to hold free and fair elections in May 2010. In contrast to previous years, when Somali region voting has been held later than in other parts of the country as a result of logistical problems, the SPDP and EPRDF have announced that in 2010 voting will be held on the same day nationwide. (Comment: This decision is likely based on pressure the EPRDF has felt to demonstrate unity with and greater development in the Somali region. End comment.) Ahmed stated that electoral workers and voters would not experience problems reaching polling places and reporting vote counts, as they have in past elections, but could not

provide any details on how this problem had been remedied.

Comment

¶16. (C) The general sentiment offered by contacts in the Somali Regional State is that while government outreach and humanitarian access have improved, these efforts have made little impact on the humanitarian and human rights situation in the region. Health and food security have worsened, conflict between government and insurgent forces continues, humanitarian actors have difficulty achieving trust from the local population while their motives are considered suspect by actors in the conflict, and people have little hope for a free and fair election. While the GoE and donors have touted improvements to humanitarian operations in the Somali region, these improvements do not appear to the local population to have positively impacted their well-being. End comment.
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